

OF SPORT AND MEN Roland Barthes

Translated by Scott MacKenzie

(Note: In some cases, separate phrases and isolated short sentences in Barthes' text have been combined into paragraphs, but Barthes' frequent use of italics and three dots for punctuation have been retained.)

What is it that compels these men to attack? Why are men so disturbed by this spectacle? Why do they get involved so entirely? Why this needless fighting? What is sport?

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Bullfighting is hardly a "sport," and yet it is perhaps the model, the extreme of all sports, with its ceremonial elegance, its strict rules of combat, the powerful strength of the adversary and the skill and courage of the man who fights.

All our modern sport can be found in this spectacle from another age, inherited from ancient religious sacrifices. But this theatre is not true theatre, for here the deaths staged are real.

The bull now appearing on the scene is going to die, and it is because this death is fatal that bullfighting is a tragedy; a tragedy in four acts, with death the epilogue.

First of all passes are made with the cloak. The fighter must get to know the bull; that is, he must play with it, provoking it, avoiding it, *valing it lightly*, in short priming it to respond to the rules of the game.

And now come the picadors. We see them coming on horseback at the far end of the arena and making their way along the barrier. Their job is to tire the bull, *to break the force of its attack*, to reduce the overwhelming force of power it has over man.

Act three: *the banderillas*. A single man, armed with no more than a beriboned hook, now sets to work to taunt the bull ... *calling it ... jeering it with light jabs* ... and eluding the bull with grace and ease ...

And now the last act. The bull is still more powerful, but we know it is going to die ... The bullfighter is going to show men why man is supreme.

First of all, this is because *man's courage is a conscious thing*; his courage is his awareness of fear: freely accepted, freely surmounted.

Secondly, man's supremacy lies in his knowledge. The bull does not know man, but man knows the bull, and can predict its movements and its limitations. Man can put his adversary where he wants it, and *if this looks danger*, man knows it, and wanted it this way.

There is something else, too, in the bullfighter's job: style. What is style? It is the ability to perform a difficult movement with grace and agility; *the ability to impart rhythm to fatality. It is being courageous and yet at the same time methodical*, endowing an act of necessity with the appearance of free choice.

Courage, knowledge and grace. These are what man pits against the power of the beast. This is the human test, the prize for which will be the death of the bull.

Thus, what the crowd is honoring in the victor, *in throwing him these flowers and gifts which he graciously returns to them*, is not so much the conquest of man over beast, for the bull is always the loser, but rather man's victory over ignorance, over fear, over necessity. Man has made a spectacle of this victory for the benefit *of all those watching, who see him as themselves and his victory as theirs*.

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And what does the crowd see in the great racing driver? The conqueror of a far more subtle enemy: time. Here all of man's courage and knowledge is brought to bear on one thing: *the machine*. Through the machine man will conquer; perhaps also through this same machine, he will die.

The relationship, therefore, between man and machine is a highly precautionary one. What is ultimately to be played at very high speed must be first practised very slowly, for speed is nothing but the reward of extreme slowness.

First of all the controls must be checked, for much is to be demanded of them: as many as twenty-five hundred gear changes in an hour. It is also essential to have a thorough knowledge of the course over which the race is to be run. First of all the track must be checked, with its angles, its curves, and its levels.

Then it must be tried out, alone, *with time* the only enemy. And against time must be pitted the machine and the track, for all three must be vanquished by the driver before ever he can triumph over his human rivals.

Finally, and most importantly, one must prepare the engine. Like a brilliant mind, it has an overabundance of riches. Twelve spark plugs have to be changed every five laps.

We are at Sebring in Florida. This is a

twelve-hour race for a variety of types of car. No sooner is the starting signal given than an implacable economy regulates every atom of movement, as time is now all around.

On the stretches it is chiefly motor power which counts, but still the effort required is a human one. The work, inventiveness and care of dozens of men have gone into it in the preparation, verifying and testing of the most difficult of equations: extreme power, minimum resistance, whether it be that of weight or of the wind ...

But in taking turns, apart from the machine's suspension, *it is on the driver that everything depends*. For here space is working against time. Therefore a man must know how to cheat space, *decide whether to spare it ... or whether to make a sharp cut ...* and he must dare to reach the threshold of the *impossible*

It is not only the driver who is fighting against time, but his entire crew. The track at Sebring is a disused airfield and tires tend to wear out very quickly. Some crews can change them in as little as ninety seconds, and to them will be owed part of the final victory.

Terrible though the price may sometimes be for this fight against time, there is no fury here; there is only the immense courage to overcome the inertia of things. The death of a driver is thus a tragic event, for it is not only

a man who dies; *it is a little bit of perfection departing from the world*.

But it is precisely because this perfection is mortal that it is human. No sooner is there a loss in one place than others are ready to take up the battle elsewhere.

This is the start of one of the World Grand Prix races. It is the most serious test of all, for the more powerful the machine, the heavier it is, and it is from this contradiction that the driver must strive for maximum speed. Therefore, these cars have no starter; *saving those few extra kilos means saving a few extra seconds*.

It is these preparations for starting that give the motor race its purpose; victory over the weight and inertia of things. When at rest, these machines are heavy, passive and hard to move. They are like birds encumbered by their wings; it is their potential power that gives them their weight.

Once they are lined up, however, in place and ready for the combat for which they are intended, they seem already lighter, straining to be off ...

No sooner have these machines left the starting line, than their mass becomes gradually transformed into agility and their weight into power. No sooner are they back in their element, which is speed, than they are ready to encompass the world, on circuits and tracks of every conceivable type: Nurburgring,

the most dangerous course of all; Monaco, the most tormenting; de Monza, the most testing; and Spa, the fastest.

Having to stop is almost like dying. If there is anything seriously wrong with the car the news has to be broken to *its master very carefully*. For the great driver does not subdue his car; he coaxes it. He is not only the one who wins; he is the one who destroys nothing. To lose one's car from the race is as sad an event as a mortal bereavement, a loss that is irreplaceable despite the fact that life still goes on as usual.

This is what a great motor race signifies: that the most rapid of forces is born only of patience, careful preparedness and subtleties; of infinitely precise and exacting actions.

What this man has succeeded at doing is to push himself and his machine to the very limits of possibility. His victory is not over his rivals; but a joint victory with them over the obstinate weight of matter. *This sport, the most murderous of all, is at the same time the most rewarding.*

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Every year, in the month of July, an important event takes place in France which captures the interest of the entire nation: The Tour de France.

Prestigious stars ... A dozen regional and national teams ... The race lasts for

one month and is divided into twenty different stages.

The start of the race is as solemn an event as a military review of the arrival of a Head of State.

Delightful cycle rides alternating with tense battles, that free rhythm between strenuous effort and pleasurable laziness that is so much a part of the French; a combination of drama, humour, and emotion, such is the fantastic spectacle that is beginning on this summer morning when the army of racers and supporters slowly begin their challenging feat.

The Tour leads into the very depths of France, and each Frenchman taking part rediscovers the houses and monuments of his country, experiencing alike the provincial atmosphere of the present and the vestiges of France's ancient glory.

People say the Frenchman has a poor knowledge of geography. His geography is not the sort picked up in books, it is that picked up from the Tour. Each year the Tour teaches him the length of the slopes and the *height of the mountains*. Each year he re-experiences the material unity of his country, surveying its frontiers and viewing again *its produce*.

This is the theatre of combat: the whole of France.

The decor is that of a great battle in

which an army of supporters will play the role of military staff and Service Corps.

This army has its generals, who stand scrutinizing the battlefield ... and its light calvary, responsible for liaison work.

It has its strategists and mathematicians ...

It has its light infantrymen ...

its historians ...

and its press correspondents.

It also has its Service corps, its heavy convoys laden with reserves, food and machines.

For without even stopping, the competitors have to eat and drink.

Just as we see in the old war pictures, *people offer drinks to the cyclists as they flash by* ... and even though the participants cannot drink wine, *wine must still be a featured part of the race*, for the Tour is France.

This great, month-long war is made up of a succession of campaigns. Each day brings its own battle; *each evening its own victor*; with water, flowers, kisses ... Before the day's winner can don the *maillot jaune* (yellow jersey), the full victory ritual must be observed.

War has its peaceful moments; the Tour, too, has its moments of happiness: as in ancient combat, weapons are put up in the evening, and peace reigns once more. This is the period of rest, the time when the warrior can attend to his needs.

And now the dance in the square ... the crowd wanders around, enjoying all the publicity surrounding the race.

This is the coverage of the day's race, a coverage that will be transmitted throughout the whole of France, for the Tour has its writers too ... and its inspired poets.

Elsewhere, competitors enjoy a meal in brotherly companionship, the leader comments on the day's events, while those who fought long and hard remain silent.

Now the weapons are made ready for the next day's battle ... For tomorrow at daybreak, everything begins again.

The fact is that this Tour de France is not merely a picturesque event; it is also a serious contest, a struggle. Against what? As in most sports, against men and crews, of course. But as is almost always the case in sports, this is a competition, not a conflict.

This means man must overcome, not man, *but the resistance of things*. And this contest is so much everybody's business that people's zeal to help breaks all bar-

riers between the spectators and the combat. Not only does the crowd take an active interest in the racers' endeavors; it provides food for them, and *runs with them*...

Even rivals chip in and help one another when any of them is in danger of having to abandon the race. For that is the key to the whole Tour: perserverance. Perserverance in the face of anger, in the face of suffering. Perserverance. In other words, refusing to give in.

The real enemy of the racer is time ... in most cases other people's time. But sometimes, on the crueller stretches of the course, it is pure time, the time of the watch.

The racer starts out alone and travels every second at his fastest possible speed, as though there were nothing else in the world but time and himself. He can never sense that he has won. *The watch abstractly tells him of his victory.* And it is because, in sports, resistance comes from things and not from man that men are so ready to help one another even though they are rivals. Helping one another means waiting for one another ... and sometimes even pushing one another along. For the object of this contest is not to see who can conquer and triumph over everyone else, but who can gain the most mastery over that third common enemy: nature, heat, cold.

It is these excesses, or worse still their

contrasts, that the racer has to fight against by continued, inflexible effort. The resistance of the earth has to be added to the resistance *of things*. The severest test set by nature for the cyclist is the mountain. The mountain—that is to say, gravity. To conquer the steep slope and the weight of matter is to assert that man is capable of controlling the whole physical universe. But this conquest is such a difficult one that man must throw his whole self into the task. This is why—as the whole country knows—the mountainous stretches are the key to the Tour; not so much because they decide the winner, but because they clearly manifest the true nature of what is at stake, the spirit of the contest, the virtues of the contestant. The end of the mountain stretch is therefore the epitome of the whole human adventure. There are victors ... There are the unlucky ones ... There is despair. There is wisdom.

No, it is not muscles that make sport. This is what the Tour de France tells us. Muscles, however valuable, are but a basic element. They alone do not win the race.

What wins the race is a certain concept of man and the world, of man in this world. This concept is that man is proven by his actions; and man's actions are aimed, not at the domination of other men, but at *the domination of things*.

Of all the sportive countries in the world, Canada is one of the coldest; and yet of all the sports played on foot, ice hockey is the fastest. Sport is the power to transform things into their opposite. And this continuing miracle is shared by the entire country, in its crowds of spectators, its press, its radio, its television. However bitter the fight may be, behind the scenes there is always the physical relationship of a country and its people.

What is a national sport? It is a sport arising out of the very elements of a nation; out of its soil and its climate. To play a game of hockey is a repetition of the claim that man has transformed the immobility of winter, the hardness of the earth and the suspension of normal life into a buoyant, vigorous and passionate sport.

The children appear to be fighting, but all they're really doing is learning to live in their country, and what the mother sees in these first grown-up gestures of her offspring she evaluates not so much in relation to the outcome of the fight but as to the development of an initiation.

This gesture which prepares the ground for combat is in keeping with the first law of the country's climate: a little solidified water and hockey becomes possible. The only thing that remains to be done with this area now

is to subject it to rules; that is to say, to strategy. In this fast sport, thought can only be reflex, and reflex has to be learned, like anything else. All possible manoeuvres are studied and taught: intercepting the puck, guiding it through a thousand obstacles, also learning how to score ... and even how to stop.

All this will be taking place in the game now beginning. There is one strict rule governing the game: no player may cross into the opposing team's side before the face-off. Hence the irresistible, liberating aspect of team deployment. It is as though they were not so much drawn to the opposite goal as to that mischievous little puck that was leading them to it.

The choral manifestations of the public mark the rhythm of the play. Their mass shouts and cheers provide spontaneous commentary on the game. All the moral values may be found invested in the sport: endurance, self-control, temerity, courage.

The great players are heroes and not stars.

As in all sports, a goal won is a great victory. But in hockey the game is so fast, and the puck so elusive, that a goal missed is not only a defeat, but almost a wound, sharp as a bullet; for a check is sharper. For man's failure to triumph over the elusive is more bitter than his failure to triumph over the ponderous.

The goal is empty. Why? Hockey is an offensive game in which the pleasure of attack is sufficient justification for all risks. Sometimes the coach of one of the teams may decide to leave his goal unprotected so as to be able to add one more man to his attacking group and thus carry the war at full strength into enemy lines.

Its very power poses a constant threat to the legality of this sport; the game is ever in danger of becoming faster than conscience and, therefore, overwhelm it. And then the sport undergoes a sort of trial by absurdity: *It is the sport's scandal*. This scandal occurs when the men break the thin barrier between the two combats: that of sport and that of life. Having lost all form of intermediary, deprived of objective and rules, the combat between the players is no longer controlled by that element of distance without which there can be no human society. It degenerates into conflict.

And then the sport returns to the immediate world of passions and aggression, dragging with it the very crowd who had come seeking purification. *Sport is the whole stretch that separates a combat from a riot*.

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It is raining in England, and yet the whole of England is out. Why? Because there's a football match at Wembley.

As with all the great sporting events,

the inauguration ritual is solemnly observed. At certain periods, in certain societies, the theatre played an important social function. It brought together entire cities in a common experience: the realization of their own passions. Today this same function is served by sport, which has its own relaxing influence. Only now the city has grown; it is no longer a town; it is a whole country; sometimes almost the entire world, one might almost say. Sport is a great modern institution cloaked in the ancestral form of the spectacle. Why is this? Why do men love sport?

First of all we must bear in mind that everything that is happening to the player is also happening to the spectator. But whereas in the theatre the spectator is only a voyeur, in sport he is also one of the actors.

And then again, sport does not confront man directly; between the adversaries there is an intermediary, an objective, a machine, a puck or ball. And this thing is the very symbol of things: it is for the conquest and mastery of this thing that man pits his strength, his skill and his courage.

Here, watching is not only living, suffering, hoping, understanding; it is also saying it, with the voice, with the gesture, with the expression; it is taking the whole world to witness; in a word, it is to communicate. Ultimately, in man there is strength, conflict, joys and

fears. Sport provides an outlet for these forces, liberating them and putting them to use, but without ever allowing them to destroy. Through sport, man experiences the struggle for survival, but the combat is reduced to the form of a spectacle, its effects, its dangers and its humiliation removed. It has lost its harmfulness, but not its spectacular appeal or its significance.

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What is sport? Sport replies with another question: which is the best? Sport gives new meaning to the question of the ancient duels, for here man's superiority is measured only in relationship to things. Which man is best able to overcome the resistance of things, the immobility of nature? Which is the best able to harness the world and give it to man ... *to all mankind*? This is what sport stands for. Occasionally people try to make it stand for something else. But this is not what sport was meant for.

What compels these men to attack? Why are men so disturbed by this spectacle? Why do they get involved so entirely? Why this needless fighting? What is sport? What is it that man puts into sport? Himself, his world. Sport is intended as a statement of the human contract.